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An Appreciation

DELIVERED BEFORE

The Sons of the Revolution
in the
District of Columbia

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 1920

DR. THOMAS E. GREEN

Former Chaplain General

General Society, Sons of the Revolution

Former President

Sons of the Revolution in the
State of Illinois

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Nat. Red Cross

Feb. 3 1927

GENTLEMEN OF THE SOCIETY:

I am thoroughly glad that your distinguished President should have asked me to speak to you for a few moments along lines germane to the birthday of Alexander Hamilton.

Not merely because as Sons of the Revolution we rejoice at all times to honor the memory of the men who fought and the minds that wrought for our independence and the setting up of a "new order of the ages."

Not merely because among his peers Hamilton should have been chosen to fill a unique place and perform an extraordinary service. I am especially glad, because in preparation for the few words that I shall offer I have spent some illuminating hours in the far away past and, coming there face to face with conditions and problems as they existed, I have found fresh ground for a lasting faith and an abiding confidence amid the perplexities of today.

In beginning his remarkable essay upon "History" Emerson says:

"Time dissipates into shining ether the solid angularity of facts. No anchor, no fence, no cable avails to keep a fact a fact. Who cares what the fact was when we have made a constellation of it to hang in heaven an immortal sign."

It is perhaps a blessing that memory plays nature's trick with unsightly ruins and the tumbled debris of circumstances. As nature abhors ugliness and drapes cliffs and rugged rocks with her festoons and garlands of verdure, and covers even the scar of a trodden pathway with the tender grass of spring, so as the years sweep on men forget the ugliness of contention and dispute, the menace of misunderstanding and perversion, the nearness of failure and the apparent certainty of disaster that surround the beginnings of movements and reforms, of accomplishments and systems.

Generations pass along. Out of the "tumult and the shouting" there gradually emerges clean cut and lucid as the light an Eternal Thing to persist forever.

And thinking simply of its perfectness we look across the years and picture an Immaculate Conception as the source of its perfectness.

We American people today serene in our consciousness that our beginning, our endowment, our progress, our accomplishment, all bear indelible marks, if not of manifest destiny, at least of fitness to endure, are apt to forget the storm out of which they came. We revere the enduring fact and forget the environment of its forging.

We speak of the Declaration, thinking of its sonorous sentences and of its picturesque dignity, and forget the whirlwind of discussion and disagreement and charge and counter-charge out of which it came.

We think of the Revolution, and remember its great salient high places of accomplishment, and forget the poverty, the struggle, the defeat, the despair of those long years of almost hopeless and yet determined conflict.

We think of the Constitution of the United States, the foundation of our Government, the final source of appeal in matters concerning law and order, the property and the peace of our people. We esteem it "one of the most remarkable documents ever penned by man," but we forget that in its creation it was alike the cause and the result of fierce conflict, of intense divergence of theory and purpose. We forget that the Convention that devised it was held behind locked doors, that its members and officers were sworn to secrecy lest their dissension should tear in pieces the feeble bond that tied together the people of the thirteen infant states in any sort of concord.

We forget that at best it was a compromise, apologized for by its friends, reprobated by its enemies, barely accepted by either and finally adopted by the States by majorities so slender as barely to give it life.

We forget that as between the two parties which formed lines of cleavage over this same Constitution we barely became the one and missed being the other. We barely became a Nation and missed being a Confederation. We barely became a Republic and missed being an aggregation of soviets.

We became what we are and what, please God, we always shall be, and missed being what we might have been and what, thank God, we shall never be, largely through the ability, the earnestness, the loyalty and the trained erudition of Alexander Hamilton.

I presume that wars have always produced similar results, in the economic and social existence of people. Someone not long ago harked back to the days of Caesar, or even as far back as the Punic Wars, and found that profiteering and monopoly, hoarding and extravagance were as characteristic then of the life of people following war, as in this later day of ours.

We do not possibly stop to think that the days which gave us "the serene majesty of the Constitution" were days of such tumult and uncertainty,

of such disputation and confusion as to justify the words of Robert Morris "that the affairs of America were at their darkest."

Debt so enormous as to invite no possibility save repudiation; money so scarce that the continental currency issued simply as a promise to pay had deteriorated until in 1781 it had become literally "not worth a continental," being valued at the rate of 600 to 1 of "solid money."

Prices as a consequence were almost beyond imagination. Mrs. John Adams paid \$15 a thousand for pins and John Marshall said that his sisters used thorns instead.

Writing paper was worth \$10 a quire. When Patrick Henry was asked to dispatch an important official communication to Benjamin Franklin at the Court of France, he was compelled to write it upon the margins of newspaper pages.

Salt could not be bought at any price; sugar rose to fifteen shillings the pound.

Prices and standards and values varied in different states and there was no common force and source of authority to adjust differences. A man who owed \$5,000 in New York might discharge it for \$3,000 in Rhode Island.

Edmond Randolph of Virginia wrote to the governor of Georgia, "Were I to unfold to you the scenes of veniality, of dishonesty and fraud which I have discovered, the disclosure would astonish you."

President Reed, of the State of Pennsylvania, was obliged to deny the rumor that he was "covertly trading with New York City, held by the British."

The French Minister wrote that "Members of Congress generally used their positions for speculation." A sad example for that early day to set to the Congressmen of ours.

And men began to despair of the experiment of representative Government in America during this critical period. Everything pointed to a fulfillment of Lord North's prediction: "That the rebelling colonies would soon be compelled to come back to the protecting arm of the mother country to save themselves from destruction by internal disputes."

According to the hastily constructed and impetuously adopted Articles of Confederation, each state had control of its own commerce. With boundaries largely undecided, and no court possessed of jurisdiction to adjudicate such demarkation; with thirteen different scales of duty and impost; with

thirteen different measures of taxation; with bickering among the states speedily destroying what little feeling of nationality and willingness for co-operation had been engendered by the war, it was certainly the low tide of unity.

When a Convention was finally called at Annapolis in September, 1786, so few of the States were represented as to preclude any concerted action.

Though waiting for several weeks, only five states sent delegates—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Virginia.

Replying to Washington's inquiry, "Why the New England States failed to send delegates to Annapolis," General Knox attributed the neglect of New Hampshire "to torpidity," of Rhode Island, "to faction and heat about the paper money," and of Connecticut "to jealousy."

At last, thoroughly discouraged, the Convention adjourned—after recommending to the legislatures represented the calling of another Convention at Philadelphia in May, 1787, the delegates to be empowered "to devise such further provisions as shall appear to them necessary to render the constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union."

There ensued a winter of uncertainty and of grave concern. Men on every side realized that the high spiritual impulse of the close of the conflict for Independence was being obscured in the sordid struggle for material gain; that unity was being irremediably lost amid the dissidence and altercations of contending policies.

Washington's was the arm of faith through it all that upheld the standard of representative government as the final reward of years of conflict and denial. Beside him as advocates of a strong Federal Government were Robert Morris, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, James Madison, John Marshall and Alexander Hamilton.

Among these, Hamilton's service can scarcely be estimated. In the face of all the disintegrating tendencies that both uncertainty and indifference had produced; when financial and economic ruin seemed to threaten the very existence of the nation, he contended steadily and ably for the establishment of a strong Central Government; and it was his influence more than any other one man's that put the nation finally on a firm financial footing, that restored the public credit, and inculcated in the minds of the people faith in a Federal Government instead of a loose and uncertain Confederation.

Chancellor Kent said of him, "All the documental proof and the current observation of the time lead us to the conclusion that he passed all his co-temporaries in his exertion to create, reconstruct, adopt and defend the Constitution of the United States."

There is only one element of order and authority in the Constitution which he did not powerfully contribute to, introduce and cause to predominate.

It is impossible that any one character could be from all angles equally virile and efficient. It needed for the perfection of the American Constitution that Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton's greatest antagonist along lines of theory and administration, should insist upon the introduction into the preamble of the Constitution of the phrase that saved us from drifting toward a limited autocracy.

That was the phrase that insured for all time the fact that the American Republic was a Democracy, that the Constitution was enacted not by a Convention of Colonies, not by an Aggregation of States, but that it derived its power and as eventually proved, has maintained its existence from the fact that it begins, "We, the people of the United States."

Federalist and anti-Federalist, Republican and Democrat each contributed thus to the final achievement. And yet when the final vote came upon its adoption, a vote which was hastened to prevent the disbanding of the Convention, of the seventy-three men who had been chosen as delegates from various states, eighteen would not attend at all. Of those who did attend part of the time, sixteen were absent at the time of final vote; three of those who remained refused to sign the document—Elbridge Gerry, of Massachusetts; Edmund Randolph, of Virginia, and George Mason, of the same state. Of the fifty-five men who attended only thirty-nine signed.

And yet born thus in the midst of great travail that Constitution has stood for a century and a quarter of expanding time.

It was not until a year afterwards that it was adopted by a sufficient number of the states to put it into operation. And when New York finally came to its approval it carried the New York Convention by a majority of but three votes. In Rhode Island its majority was barely two.

When it was published, criticism, disapproval and ridicule burst about it. It was denominated everything from a charter of governmental autocracy to a weak compromise that amounted to nothing.

And the strength of it, gentlemen, lies in that very fact; that it was a compromise, and that being a compromise of theory it opened the way for an eventual unanimity of support.

In the closing hours of the Convention Hamilton said, "That no man's ideas were more remote from this final document than his own were, but he did not hesitate between the chance of good coming from it and anarchy and convulsion without it."

Washington, in sending a copy to Lafayette, called it "a child of fortune." And to Patrick Henry he wrote that he "wished that it might have been different, but sincerely believed it was the best that could be obtained at that time."

But with its adoption things began to clear. Tumult and confusion ceased, a President was elected, Congress assembled, the states merged their interests and shared their responsibilities, the thing of which such evil had been prophesied gave the final test of its value; it worked and it has been working ever since.

It may be of interest to recount that it was this compromise between Hamilton and Jefferson, this bargain between the two protagonists, that was responsible for the Washington of today.

Hamilton's first task as Secretary of the Treasury was to propose that all the debts of the states and of the Confederacy should be assumed and paid by the United States.

In order to get the debts of the states included, Hamilton made a bargain with Jefferson that in return for his vote and that of Virginia the National Capital should be located eventually on the banks of the Potomac, where Virginia had all the time contended it ought to be. And for that compromise between New York and Virginia, Hamilton and Jefferson bought the votes of the Pennsylvania members by the concession that the seat of government should stop ten years in Philadelphia on its way south.

These are interesting rambles and reminiscences full of fascination. We are standing today in the midst of the perils and the contradictions, the problems and the difficulties of our day consequent upon the ending of the great world war. By virtue of the magnitude of the havoc, the task of reconstruction and recreation seems stupendous in its outline.

Even we who came into the war last, and who providentially suffered least—are face to face with anomalies as bizarre as they are inexplicable.

Never such returns from the broad fields of America—and yet never such prices for food.

Never such balances of gold and never such a price for money.

Never such wages for labor—and never such a cry for more.

Never such a warning against extravagance—and never such an orgie of waste.

Never such need of broad constructive statesmanship, and never such a riot of piffling, piddling partisan politics.

Never such need of mutuality and never such fogs of suspicion.

Never such need of purposeful activity—and never such a welter of discontent.

We shall come through.

The foundation of that confidence lies in the heredity and the environment of America.

Hope is the greatest asset in American character.

Faith is, after all, a greater part of our make-up than fecund acres or flaring rolling mills.

We shall come through.

But if ever we needed an appeal to the intelligent unselfishness that alone can insure self-government, it is now. If the things for which America stands are to endure, there must be the lasting foundation that our fathers laid developed by the united soul of a united people.

It will not do to trifle with lawlessness. It will not do to minimize disloyalty. This Constitution still stands because through all its history it has found its strength in its stupendous prelude, "We, the people."

Against the mighty authority of that general good it will not do to give anarchy and the forces that it breeds an inch of leash, an hour of existence.

Nor can the defiant selfishness born of luxury and wanton extravagance venture to justify its existence.

The anarchy of witless wealth is as criminal as the maniacal maunderings of a bestial Bolshevism.

Do you want a later prophet to read the words and the thoughts of Alexander Hamilton into a fresh message to the American people? Do you want a ringing appeal whose answer shall still the forces of disorder and make for quietude and peace?

Here it is in the words of Abraham Lincoln, words that have, alas, been too nearly forgotten by the American people, but which should be emblazoned upon the minds and hearts of all in this time of unrest, of conflict and of agitation and radicalism:

"Let reverence of the law be breathed by every mother to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap; let it be taught in schools, seminaries and colleges; let it be written in primers, spelling books and almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit and proclaimed in legislative halls and enforced in courts of justice; let it become the political religion of the nation."

As Sons of the Revolution we cannot do less than bind ourselves in a perpetual covenant, that so far as in us lies righteousness, justice and civic honor shall maintain and defend the American Constitution, the safeguard of Freedom—the Magna Charta of our Liberties.



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